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Taming and Training in The Human Use of Elephants; The Case of Nepal - Past, Present and Future

It is a curious fact that by contrast with equine studies, a field that includes extensive historical and sociological work (e.g Budiansky 1998, Cassidy 2002, 2003, 2005, 2007, Clutton-Brock 1992, Derry 2003, 2006, Hurn 2008a, 2008b), elephant husbandry has yet to be constituted as an integrated field of academic enquiry. There has been little or no historiography of elephant husbandry as such, but instead a diffusely scattered range of materials in which captive elephant management is sometimes only incidental. The emphasis, approach and critical perspective in this material varies widely, including for example; collages of secondary sources on war elephants in the classical world (Kistler 2005), shifts in Enlightenment understandings of elephants from their exotic captivity in Europe (Rothfels 2008), reports of the colonial supervision of timber elephant operations in India (Sanderson 1878, Millroy 1922, see also Wemmer 1995), hagiographies of the elephant-back hunting exploits of Nepali rulers (Smythies 1942), accounts of peasant revolts concerned with elephant catching obligations in Raj-era Bengal (Schendel 1985) and Mughal-era Assam (Bhadra 1983), enumerations of Sri Lankan elephant commands (Zvelebil 1979), or studies of the Sanskrit *Gaja Sastra*; the Hindu veterinarian literature concerned with elephants (Edgerton 1931, Meulenbeld 2002:557-579, Wakankar & Mhaiskar 2006, Bandopadhyay & Brahmachary 1999). As such then, the history of captive elephant management is largely a story yet to be told, albeit one I have begun to develop with regard to Nepal (Locke 2008, and see also Hart & Locke 2007).

Furthermore, my claim about this historiographic lacuna also applies to the sociology of

contemporary elephant husbandry. Here, the small amount of existing social research has tended to consist of little more than brief questionnaires and interviews guided by narrowly defined and instrumental agendas, typically conducted by researchers whose primary interest and disciplinary orientation is toward elephants rather than their handlers. This is evident in work by animal behavioural scientists (e.g. Hart 1994, Hart 1997, Hart & Sundar 2000, Hart 2005), vets (e.g. Dangolla et al 2002), animal welfare campaigners (e.g. Ghosh 2005), interdisciplinary students (Vortkamp 2006) and even market research companies (A C Nielsen 2003). This is not to deny the value of this work in a nascent field, but rather to recognise it as a prelude to a more substantive approach ideally comprising long-term ethnographic field research that recognises the agency, expertise and lifeworld of handlers, as I have attempted in my study of elephant handling in Chitwan, Nepal (Locke 2007).

Further such studies would permit rich comparison, and facilitate better-informed policy-making. Only in Richard Lair's 'Gone Astray: The Care and Management of The Asian Elephant in Domesticity' (1997) is the need for such an approach acknowledged, when he writes: "The crucial caretaking function performed by mahouts and owners requires the entry of humanities such as social anthropology, as well as more arcane subjects such as comparative religion, social history, linguistics etc" (1997:1). Whilst Lair's book is a response to practical issues of captive elephant management in the contemporary world, as are recent elephant care manuals (e.g. Namboodiri 1997, Phuangkum et al 2005), it is significant in presenting elephant husbandry as a multi-faceted phenomenon requiring systematic scholarly investigation.

Such an endeavour is ideally suited to the growing field of anthrozoology; the inter-disciplinary study of human-animal relations. A vision of elephant husbandry as an integrated, multi-disciplinary enquiry subsumed under the rubric of anthrozoology thus requires mapping the variety of elephant husbandry practices through time and across space, enumerating the purposes for which humans have deployed elephants, (as vehicles, as military technology, and as expert labour), as well as the ways in which humans have valued elephants (as objects of fear and veneration, as political and

economic commodity, and as political and religious symbols). More specifically, this entails tracing continuities between historical accounts and contemporary practices through socio-culturally situated traditions, and their currently transformed instantiations. This paper represents a step towards such a goal by considering the historical trajectory of an integral aspect of elephant husbandry in a particular setting; namely the taming and training of elephants in Nepal, tracing the shift from wild capture to domestic breeding and the welfare interventions of international NGOs.

Nepali Elephant Capturing

Key to understanding the taming and training of elephants in Nepal is an appreciation of the longstanding status of all elephants, wild or captive, as royal property, ultimately deriving from their role as military technology. As an example of this kind of use, a report commissioned by the Nepali Royal Palace in 1985 mentions the 5th century Lichchhavi King Mandev building a bridge across the Gandaki River to transport hundreds of his war elephants (in Shrestha et al 1985). This of course would have required a system for the procurement, provision and maintenance of elephants, an undertaking dependent upon the organizational resources of the state. This military heritage surely helped ensure the significance of elephants as symbols of political power long after their use in war had atrophied. Utilised on ceremonial occasions like investitures or hunts, the elephant remained a valuable commodity signifying the political power of the state.

As Richard Burghart makes clear, the rule of kings in pre-modern Hindu states was premised upon their status as lords of the land, atop a tenurial hierarchy structured according to an idiom of proprietorial rights (1978:521-524). Indeed, by the 19th century the Shah Kings of Gorkha ruling over the conquered territories we now know as Nepal referred to their domain as 'the entire possessions of the king of Gorkha' (*gorkhã rãj bhar muluk*) (Burghart 1984:103). This most definitely included the elephants that wandered in their forests, and we can be sure of this from the Panjiar Documents, a collection of 50 state-issued documents from Nepal's lowland Tarai dating back to 1721, when the territories comprising Nepal were subject to the rule of

numerous petty kingdoms (Krauskopff & Meyer 2000). From these documents, of which seven pertain to elephants, several consequences of their status as royal property are evident: The capture of elephants was rewarded with grants of land; locals were required to supply their labour for elephant hunts in lieu of other tax obligations; and the state institution of the *sarkari hattisar* or government elephant stable emerged for the upkeep of captured elephants, for which a system of ranks and roles developed, and for which staff received salaries from the state.

Although elephants were kept in stables ultimately administered by the state, there is evidence of the state granting rights of usufruct to individuals, so that the Tharu; the local, low status ethnic group, or *janajati*, who captured and cared for the state's elephants, might also use them in agriculture and logging. Such privileged compensation for services rendered to the state further justified taxing communities when not providing their labour (*jhara*) in elephant hunts (*hatti kheda*). Some captured elephants were simply too precious to be awarded to locals however, as in the case of Daya Raut who presented the King a one tusked elephant (*ek danta hatti*) during a royal visit at Hariharpur. Such an elephant was considered particularly auspicious due to its likeness to Ganesh the elephant headed god, who is typically represented with a broken tusk (see for example Alter 2004:95-101, Delort 1992, Saller 1998: 127-130, Wylie 2008:69-72). According to a document issued in 1827, for this Daya Raut was awarded the revenue collecting rights to Babhani village within Cherwant *praganna* (an administrative area) in Bara district. This was in addition to a previous document from 1820 in which he was awarded a grant of land and a turban of honour (*pagari*) for his service to the state.

This document urges Daya Raut to continue performing capture operations according to the *jaghiya* and *khor kheda* methods (the former involving chasing, lassooing and tethering; the latter herding into a prepared enclosure), to obey the instructions of the *daroga* (the elephant stable manager), and to enjoy the customary taxes and income from performing the elephant training function (*sidhali rautai*). In the Tarai then, we can see that elephant catching represented an important component of the local political

economy, for which those overseeing elephant catching operations (the *raut*) could also become a wealthy *jimidar* - an entrepreneurial tax collector with juridical authority who promoted agricultural settlement on behalf of the state (Guneratne 1996, Guneratne 2002:107). Furthermore, this business had international ramifications, evident in a Jesuit report from 1672 that the kingdom of either Morang or Makwanpur, paid an annual tribute of seven elephants to the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb (Wessels 1924:165), a custom that continued under Prithvi Narayan Shah, the first Gorkha king of Nepal, in payment to the succeeding British.

These practices of taming and training mature, wild-captured elephants continued through the unified era of the Shah Kings (1769-1846), the usurping Rana rulers (1846-1951), and the restored Shah monarchy of the latter twentieth century. During the early twentieth century, both Chandra Shamsher Rana (1901-1929) and Juddha Shamsher Rana (1932-1945) seem to have taken great pleasure in profligate displays of extravagance hosting hunts or *shikar*, entertaining King George V in 1911, the Prince of Wales (and future Edward VIII) in 1921, and Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy of India in 1938, all of which relied upon hundreds of elephants and the infrastructure to sustain their capture, training and maintenance. However, a host of political and economic pressures took their toll on the state's ability to maintain its *hattisars,* which were drastically reduced. These included the 1934 earthquake that devastated the Kathmandu Valley, the cost of maintaining numerous illegitimate Rana offspring, the political competition amongst them, and the commitment of troops to support the British against the Japanese in 1942. By the time King Tribhuvan was restored to power in 1951 after the ignominy of years under virtual house arrest, with the support of disenfranchised Ranas and an Indian influenced Nepali Congress party (Whelpton 2005:67-79, Thapa & Sijipati 2003:14-16), he was keen to take up the regal pursuits by which kings traditionally displayed their majesty (*cf* Burghart 1987). As a result the network of *hattisars* expanded (see WWF 2003 and Locke 2007:92-96).

This coincided with increasing concern for natural resource management and biodiversity conservation, leading to the innovation of protected areas at the command

of Tribhuvan's son and successor Mahendra. These were projects for which Nepal's captive elephants were deployed in support – facilitating biodiversity research, conducting anti-poaching patrols, and stimulating a new tourist economy of elephant-back nature safaris (as pioneered in the 1960s by John Coapman at his Tiger Tops safari lodge). With forests dwindling, so too were the wild elephant populations from which Nepal's captives were recruited. The *hattisar* population could no longer be sustained. The final instance of wild elephant capture in Nepal occurred in 1970. In 1975 Nepal became a signatory to CITES - the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, theoretically ruling out the legitimate purchase of elephants from India, where they are still commercially available. In 1984, an international exchange with Burma of 4 rhino for 16 elephants served as a stop-gap measure. Then, in 1986, at the recommendation of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMTNC), the Khorsor Elephant Breeding Center was established in Chitwan, at the edge of the jungle. This inaugurated a new era of elephant breeding, in which tame juveniles rather than wild adults are trained (see Locke 2007:97-104 and 153-155), and at which there has been considerable success in survival rates of captive-born elephants.

Nepali Elephant Breeding

Analytically distinguishing taming from training may be problematic, and raises a whole host of issues concerning domestication which I discuss elsewhere (Locke 2007: 34-41, Locke *nd*), but for the purposes of this presentation, the contrast to be made between training adult, wild-caught and juvenile, captive-bred elephants, concerns the different degrees of elephants' behaviourally-adapted familiarity with humans at the inception of their training for work. At Khorsor, contemporary elephant training, or *hattiko talim,* is a procedure that typically takes between two and three weeks to complete, depending upon the temperament of the elephant and the season of its training. It is intended to habituate elephants to a social life shared with humans, to forge a durable bond of co-operation between an elephant and his principal handler the *phanet,* and to instil responsiveness to a basic repertoire of verbal and tactile commands. Testifying to historical continuity between the era of capture and the era of breeding, the designation *phanet* originally signified an elephant capturer (Krauskopff & Meyer 2000:43), whose

duties also included taming and training, as the closely related Indian term *phandi* still does.

Whereas the previous account from the time of elephant capture is constrained by a historical methodology utilising a scant body of documentary sources conducive to analysing elephants as commodities, my material from the contemporary era of elephant breeding has the advantage of an ethnographic methodology conducive to elephants as living beings, which additionally permits perspective on indigenous understandings and experiences of taming and training practices. As a result, *hattiko talim* can be seen not only in purely instrumental terms as an operational procedure (as in Dhungel, Brawner & Yoder 1990, Fernando 1989, Khit 1989, Kurt 1995), but also as a ritual process integral to the lifeworld of handlers, or *hattisare,* in the regimented, total institution (*cf* Goffman 1961) that is the *hattisar*. As such, it becomes possible to foreground the agency and sub-culture of an occupational community that has the most intimate of relations with elephants. From such a position, it also becomes possible to question the assumptions implicit in this paper's title – 'the human use of elephants'.

Indeed, 'the human use of elephants' suggests an impoverished perspective of domination predicated on what Donna Haraway has called human exceptionalism (2008). Whilst *hattisare* do at times conceive of their role in terms of an instrumentalist human/animal dualism through the modality of domination, there are also contingent scenarios in which the alternate ontological status of elephants as persons and as gods are emphasised through relational modalities of mutuality and devotion, as I argue elsewhere (Locke 2009). *Hattiko talim* does not so much entail a one-way process of humanly-imposed modification and control, but rather of ritually-sanctified mutual attunement, and the process itself envelops the whole *hattisar* community in a state of ritual reverence oriented towards supporting the *phanet* and his *hatti* through a crucial rite of passage in both of their lives.

This ritual initiation commences with the separation of the juvenile elephant from its mother, whereupon it is taken into the jungle roped upto a training elephant (*talim dine*

hatti or koonkie). The trainee elephant is later returned to its new training post at the perimeter of the *hattisar*. This must be ritually purified, and a sacrificial ritual or *puja* conducted to petition the support, and appease the wrath of gods pertinent to the success of the training, which include Ganesh, whose 'substance-nature' is understood to inhere in all elephants, as well as the Tantric Tharu forest goddess, *Ban Devi,* who controls the jungle and its wildlife, and the local area god *Bikram Baba.* From this time on the *phanet* is subject to a vow of asceticism or *sanyas*, which involves the avoidance of meat, alcohol, and contact with women, as well as maintenance of ritual purity by taking food before anyone else and washing one's own utensils.

Once ritually initiated, elephant training consists of two main practices. The first is daytime driving training, in which the juvenile and his *phanet* are roped up to two training elephants. The second is the evening sensitization sessions, in which the juvenile, tethered to his post, is subject to the massaging and singing of the men of the *hattisar,* and the waving of torches of fire –a phenomenon the elephant must be taught not to fear. The elephant's body is rubbed all over, so as to reduce 'ticklishness' and familiarise it with human contact, whilst the men sings songs to familiarise it with human sound. The first and final songs of the session are religious, whilst the interim songs are bawdy, inverting hierarchic norms of respect to the stable manager, the *subba*, in what Victor Turner would recognise as the liminal anti-structure of communitas (Turner 1969). Drawing on a long heritage of situated learning in communities of practice (Lave 1993), this contemporary approach to training captive-bred, juvenile elephants represents an adaptation from traditional practices of training wild-caught, mature elephants. As such, it represents a recent innovation within a dynamic tradition of skilled practice. By the way, I shall be showing my film 'Servants of Ganesh: Inside The Elephant Stable' tomorrow at 1.15pm – this features the *phanet* Satya Narayan going through training with his elephant Paras Gaj.

INGOs and Humane Elephant Training

This brings me to the final section of this account. Recently, my primary field site; the Khorsor Elephant Breeding Center, has been subject to the intervention of a 'humane

elephant training programme' instituted by an internationally renowned wildlife organization, consisting of workshops led by a western animal trainer. Whilst this programme has been admirably conceived, effectively implemented, and well received by the *hattisare* themselves, it is significant that its programme of positive reinforcement was justified through a representation of indigenous training practice that perhaps unduly emphasised the role of fear and cruelty, which played upon a naively essentialized notion of tradition as ossified and unchanging, and which therefore unwittingly denied the handlers their agency.

The rationale for the programme is implicitly critical and neo-imperialist, implying that indigenous practices are intrinsically backwards and cruel, and must be rectified through the imposition of enlightened western wisdom, despite a converse celebration of the antiquity of Asian traditions of captive elephant management. Its justificatory documents failed to acknowledge the dynamic character of elephant handling tradition, which embraces change and innovation, as I have intimated. In an aid-dependent country that has valorised the exotic other of modernity whilst denigrating the mundane self of tradition (Pigg 1992, 1996:163), I argue that the authorisation for this programme is indicative of a hegemonic development ideology that has replaced the previous hierarchic status idiom of purity and pollution with one concerned with access to the fruits of development, or *bikas* (see Locke 2007:235-277). Those with such access assert themselves as the holders of wealth and power –intermediaries between western modernity and Nepali traditionalism, whereas those without, such as the *janajati hattisare,* are ideologically inferiorised and politically and economically subordinated. These *thorai bikasi manche*, or 'not very developed people' are by implication ignorant, and must therefore be shown how to be properly modern.

I argue that this is one of the inescapable consequences of the humane elephant training programme, albeit one that both its implementers and the handlers have tried to mitigate. The expertise of handlers has been integral to captive elephant management in the modern era of national parks, biodiversity management, and wildlife tourism, yet the regulating authorities have consistently effaced it, thereby disempowering them. Upon

my return to Chitwan last year, it was thus very interesting to hear senior handlers asserting their agency in their own commentaries on their participation in the humane elephant training workshops. They felt able to represent themselves as stakeholders working with, rather than merely learning from, the western animal trainer. As experts in their own right though, with deep empathetic commitments to their elephants, they added their own aspirations to further develop and modify the elephant-training regime in ways which also acknowledge the importance of ritual practice for instilling devotional commitment to elephants. They were happy that finally some attention had been paid to them instead of merely their elephants. Despite its implication then in an ideology that creates constituencies of the backward, who are deserving of development, the humane elephant-training programme might actually offer the disempowered handlers the prospect of asserting their role in future planning and policy for captive elephant management.

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